

You'll Hear The Trumpet Sound



*mama:*

*if i was born, like all men, a thomas doubting  
it was your life through which the Christ first told me  
'put your finger here and see my hands'*

*it is with humble admiration and all my love  
that i dedicate this little book to you*

1.

The world ended on a Tuesday. It would not have been, otherwise, a particularly noteworthy Tuesday morning in Northern Yemen. The sun, already risen, was tattooing unrelenting reminders of mortality on the withered brown remains of parched leaves that had long ago surrendered their last memories of life.

And then, out of nowhere, came the fluffiest white cloud the world had ever seen, casting a long, single shadow upon the earth. The cloud

didn't blow in from the east like clouds normally did, but descended steadily downward from the heavens; a ball of cotton candy growing bigger and bigger all the time, straining to kiss planet earth. Defying the laws of physics - which clouds usually obey so conscientiously - a single passenger rode atop it, straddling it like a cowboy on a raging bull: one hand gripping the soft white powder, the other hand waving uneasily above his head, searching for balance and clutching a long, golden trumpet. The passenger was an angel, and his name was Leonard.

God has created angels for a lot of different purposes. Some angels send messages, some work as guardians, and there's even one angel that God created for the unenviable job of bringing death to all of earth's creatures. Among these, and their many other kinds, are the angels that God has made to play music in the heavenly band. That's the sort to which Leonard belonged. He was a trumpeter, and a very good one. He hadn't been *created* that way; being God's number one trumpeter was a distinction for which he had worked millennia to attain.

You see, as it turns out, competition among the heavenly host can be pretty steep. In fact, there was a time when Leonard - the best trumpeter in all creation - had been beaten out for just about every gig a musician angel could get. He didn't play in the Throne Room, nor was he to be found amongst the

band of rejoicing angels who celebrated each sinner's repentance. In fact, there was a time when Leonard had attended every trumpeter audition in heaven, and never once had he made the final cut.

Not all heavenly music was composed for heaven alone. Sometimes, God would send out some of his musical angels from the realm of glory to spice up announcements on planet earth. Leonard's last audition, before the proclamation of the end of the world, had actually been for one of these earthly performances. It was an event titled *The Birth of the King*. This wasn't a one angel show; God was sending a whole heavenly host to Bethlehem to announce the arrival of his only son. It was a moment so greatly anticipated that Leonard would have been satisfied to have any part in it. At auditions, he didn't even try out for the solo. He knew that he would be perfectly content to stay in the back, puffing out a couple of accent notes. To play for the shepherds of Bethlehem that night, Leonard would have even been willing to lay down his trumpet, leave it behind, and take up the triangle instead.

But, as was the story of his angel life, he wasn't chosen; not for the trumpet, nor for the triangle. It was a heckuva disappointment, especially when the other angels came back upstairs, excitedly talking about what a thrill it had been to bring a joyful sound to planet earth on such an important day.

Most greatness uses a little insecurity as fuel. Leonard was no exception. Millenia of failures had left him more than just a little bit worried that God had *made* him to be a runner-up. But, he also knew that someday the Christ would return to the fallen world, and that when he did, no fewer than seven angels were going to be called upon to visit earth and play the trumpet at different times. He decided - just as soon as he heard about the shepherds' excitement in Bethlehem - that he was going to work harder than ever to win a spot as one of them.

He stood on the precipice of heaven, as far off from the other angels as he could be, his back turned towards the goings on of planet earth, and blew his lungs out. Scale after scale, tune after tune, day after day. He worked harder than any trumpeter in the history of heavenly trumpeters and, one day, God appointed him the honour of being the Seventh Golden Trumpeter: the one who would bring earth the big news.

And that's how Leonard got here, arriving in Northern Yemen more than two-thousand years after the Christ's ascension, to make history. Well, maybe not to *make* history so much as to announce the end of it.

Northern Yemen. Who would have thought to look for the end of the world there? Not me. Even if I *had* thought to look there, I'm not sure how I would have been able to find it on a map. By the

time the world ended, Yemen was hot, dry, dusty and had little bits of it exploding all the time.

When I was little, I used to collect cardboard milk cartons and empty toilet paper rolls and my mom would help me paint them to look like little houses. First we'd use a little tin of white paint to cover up the brand-names, expiration dates and nutritional information, and then we'd take a fine tipped black brush to add doors and windows and house numbers and stuff like that. I got the idea from a picture in a magazine. I would start with one house and end up with entire villages constructed of modest half-pint shacks and two quart mansions with towering chimneys, three toilet paper rolls high. They were spectacular little scenes. When creating the villages grew boring, which it always did, I would declare a natural disaster - like flaming meteorites from outer space - and stomp the heck out of the whole thing. Destroying is a different sort of fun than creating, but little boys like me never bothered with the philosophical nuances that distinguish the pleasures.

I mention this because, incidentally, the village upon whose edge Leonard was descending had a similar look. It was as if it, too, had been imagined from a bunch of cardboard milk cartons upon whose pliant surfaces some bored kid had decided to extract vengeance through a declared natural disaster. Only in the case of Yemen, the



natural disaster wasn't flaming meteorites from outer space, it was humanity.

Abandoned houses, a post-office and a few small shops lay in half construction; the remains of their top halves were piled in charred heaps of stone and concrete that littered the small town's perimeter. Just outside the village, past the unwieldy upturned rubble of the old two-lane, black-top road, was a gentle sloping hill. The topsoil of the hill was hard and dry. Here and there patches of grass announced themselves like islands lost amid oceans of endless brown dust. At the bottom of this hill lay more than a dozen graves, haphazardly marked and still fresh enough as to be considered tragic.

Leonard's cloud dissolved upon the dry ground of this little hill, leaving his angel feet to step gingerly for the first time on the slowly tilting planet. One small step for an angel, one giant change for mankind. Busy as he was contemplating the moment in his mind, Leonard didn't bother to see this monumental step himself. His dark angel eyes were already closed in sublime concentration and his angel lips whetted. He inhaled deeply and then paused, wanting to feel the pressure build in his lungs and the accompanying thump of his own heart. It was his heart which drove the tempo of his song. When the pressure had risen uncontainably, and he could no longer hold in the good news, he parted his pursed lips ever so slightly and let slip out the most

pure note the world had ever heard. The melody was sweet and overwhelmingly triumphant, with the sort of wailing authority that might have made Louis Armstrong roll over in his grave for a better listen. Each note he hit built upon the last, sonic cascades of rhythm weaving up and down over endless, effortless scales. It was the song that planet earth had been groaning to hear for a long old time - ever since the garden - and Leonard lost himself in it.

Burt, Leonard's friend from the heavenly host, had told him over and over again what it had been like to play in Bethlehem those many years ago. A dozen shepherds, sleepy, cold and unsuspecting, had lit up like Christmas trees when they heard The Good News. Burt said you could feel hope bursting through every tired seam in the weary hearts of man that night. The energy, Burt said, had been infectious. That was before anyone even *knew* who Jesus was and what he had done for humanity. Now that the whole world had heard of the Christ, his sacrifice and the reconciliation he had established between creation and its creator, Leonard could only imagine that when his last note faded and he opened his eyes, the celebration he witnessed would be twice as joyful. People *always* rejoice when trumpeters stop playing. That's one of the fundamental tenets of marching band instruments.

In all his years of practicing, anticipating this moment, it had never occurred to Leonard that

when he opened his eyes and looked down at his audience, it would be comprised of a single, dusty figure staring back up at him with a bemused expression on his face and a shovel in his hand. But at the bottom of that bare Yemeni knoll, that's exactly what he saw.

Undeterred by the modest setting of his audience, Leonard pressed on with his proclamation. He gathered his long white angel robe around him and opened his arms wide with a generous flourish. His hands trembled with excitement and the sleeves of his gown dilated in the soft wind. "Behold!" he proclaimed, "the Lamb of God, the Anointed One, who died to take away the sins of the world and rose from the dead, is now returned in glory!"

At auditions, it had always surprised the other angels how much deeper Leonard's voice became when he raised it in proclamation. His words of good triumphing over evil came tumbling out of him impressively, and all the while the man at the foot of the hill wiped the sweat patiently from his forehead, his eyebrows knit close together in concentration.

When he had finished, an expectant silence grew like leavened bread in the air between them. The man looked away from Leonard, his gaze turned down the uneven row of graves beside him, and then beyond them to the empty field with its islands of grass and oceans of dust. A long time ago, they had belonged to his grandfather. In happier times, they

had provided sustenance for him and his family. Not much grew there now. When his eyes returned to the angel before him, he winced at the white sheen of the angel's robes reflecting off an unforgiving ray of sunlight, and he raised his one free hand to shield himself from it. He licked his thin lips and, before saying his first word, cocked his head back and to the side in the form of a half-hopeful expression.

“You don't happen to have something to drink, do you?”

2.

When I was in fourth grade there was a terrible tragedy called Hurricane Katrina. It was a terrible tragedy in two ways. First of all, it was a terrible tragedy because it was a great big storm that hit the Gulf of Mexico, flooded a city called New Orleans and killed a lot of people. Second of all, it was a terrible tragedy because there was a girl in my class whose name was Katrina, and as a result of the hurricane she got stuck with a nickname that she could never quite shake. It *might* not have stuck so

well, but the very week of the hurricane she got mad at a kid named Harvey Wittenberger for stepping on her white shoes in the cafeteria and, in retaliation, smacked him in the head with her plastic lunch tray. Harvey deserved it. He did it on purpose knowing full well that the shoes were new. But that was it. From then on it was “*look out. Here comes Hurricane Katrina,*” every time Katrina came around.

The most memorable thing about Hurricane Katrina (Hurricane Katrina the hurricane, not Hurricane Katrina the girl) was the lesson made of it by our teacher, Mrs. Terfel. She told us about all the little boys and girls in New Orleans that couldn't afford any food to eat because of the hurricane and said that she had an idea to help them. She passed a sheet of paper around the class and said that, instead of buying school lunches, for that entire week anybody that wanted could pledge to put their lunch money in a mason jar that she left on her desk. The kids that put their money in the jar could eat peanut butter and jelly sandwiches that she herself would make. All the lunch money that we raised would be sent to the little boys and girls in New Orleans. Mrs. Terfel said it would teach us a valuable lesson of what it means to sacrifice something of our own for the sake of others. As an added bonus, bringing in a sack-lunch would keep Harvey Wittenberger from getting pounded in the lunch-line by our own Hurricane Katrina.

By their natures, most angels are helpful beings. After the man asked him for a drink, Leonard spent a long moment considering the possibility of milking precipitation from the cloud he had been riding. Whatever moisture the cloud may have contained, however, had already dissipated, just like everything else, into the heat. He shook his head.

“Not a problem,” the man replied, stabbing the sharp end of his shovel into the unforgiving earth, “just thought I’d ask.”

Leonard, in turn, squinted back at the man, the lower half of whose body was obscured by the progress he had made in his morning’s labour. This man was exhibiting none of the fear that had characterized the response of the shepherds in Bethlehem. He didn’t shake or tremble or question why the angel had chosen to make this announcement to him. Of even greater peculiarity, Leonard could sense none of the impending ecstasy of which Burt had spoken so fondly. He felt from this man no impulse to rush back into his town, racing to be the first to share with his neighbours the good news that he had heard. In fact, despite the determination demonstrated by each deliberate stroke of his shovel into the hard ground, at a glance, Leonard wasn’t sure if the man’s slight frame could muster the strength to move at an elevated speed. It was then that he noticed, for the first time, the crushed milk carton appearance of the buildings and

the stones strewn like squirted milk around the perimeter. He thought to himself, then, that it wasn't really much of a town for the man to run back to in the first place. The Kingdom of God that the Christ had established would look like many different things when he returned, but Leonard was a bit surprised that this drab scene was one of its manifestations.

The angel approached the man gingerly, still finding his earth-legs. The features of the man's face became clearer with every step, the same way that a tarnished bronze dish becomes clearer with the hard rub of a rag dipped in lemon-juice. His skin, the colour of a creamed cup of coffee, was drawn taut over his round cheekbones and blended with the layer of dust that covered him from head to foot. His hair was black and greasy, with unpredictable threads of silver curled into its unruly locks. His mouth opened and closed indeterminably, a thick, dry tongue at first protruding and then disappearing again like a hesitant chameleon. When opened, his mouth didn't reveal many teeth, but the ones that he had were black and rotting. As a habit, the man clinched his jaw hard to the right, precisely as he would have done were he struggling to crack a walnut.

Leonard squatted down at the edge of the hole the man was digging and rested his trumpet between his angel thighs. Apart from pausing for the angel's proclamation, the man had hardly broken



the cadence of his shoveling since the cloud's arrival. Leonard was about to repeat his well-rehearsed speech about how the Christ had just returned to earth, when he noticed a single line running like a dried riverbed down the dusty edges of the man's cheek. It had not been long ago, Leonard noted to himself, that the man had been crying.

"Excuse me," the angel began more slowly, "I'm not sure if you could hear me clearly from up there. I have been sent to tell you that the world is ended."

It is not unusual for angels to announce themselves at inconvenient times. The man paused from his work and raised his hand to his chest. "It doesn't *feel* like anything has changed."

Leonard's eyes narrowed, fixed conspicuously on the chest which he could see thumping beneath the translucency of the man's ribcage. "How were you expecting to feel?"

"Less hungry, for one," the man replied, narrowing his own eyes in response, as if trying to see the loaf of God's own bread the angel may have concealed beneath his gown. In different circumstances, the man may have responded to news of the end times differently, but hunger has a funny way of twisting everything. It will turn a man into an animal; a suspicious and whimpering whipped dog. Leonard couldn't understand this. Only those who have hungered can.

“We’re in a sort of transition period right now while things are being set up for the Judgment,” Leonard explained, avoiding, as best he could, the nuances of the mystical moment the two of them were presently sharing.

“I see,” the man said with the sort of low sigh that rises only from a gnawing stomach. “If I still have a few minutes, then, I’d like to dig this grave for my daughter. She is going to die today—” he paused, his voice catching on some unseen trip wire. He adjusted his grip on the shovel’s shaft. “Or, maybe she already has.” With great effort, the tip of his shovel stabbed another deep cut into the dirt.

His interest intensified, Leonard’s gaze shifted to inspect what he now realized to be a row of graves. In a very short while, all the dried bones buried there would be rising up again like slices of golden bread shooting up from an industrial toaster.

“How do you know she’s going to die today?”

“Children get a look in their eyes that tells you when they can’t fight any longer.” The father wiped at a long bead of sweat that was presently winding its way down the side of his face. Lowering his head again, he took another scoop of brown earth and tossed it over his shoulder. “We have had enough practice with that look by now to know it.”

Leonard was not an angel who was much accustomed with death. At times, his practice had

been interrupted by the laughter of Christians in heaven after they had shuffled off their mortal coil and crossed into the afterlife, but this was his first personal encounter with the other side of the gate.

“Do your people always prepare burials before death itself?”

The father shook his head and explained that, hard as the earth was now, if he waited until the afternoon, the sun would bake it to stone. To this man’s people, having the dead buried as soon as possible was an important part of the mourning process. They believed that the dead were more comfortable when they couldn’t hear the wails of their loved ones.

Angels are creatures of peculiar instincts. No sooner had the words been spoken than Leonard removed the golden trumpet from his lap and lay it on the ground beside him with exquisite gentleness. Using his right hand to steady himself, he offered the man a reassuring smile and descended into the hole beside him.

3.

Mrs. Terfel was employed by the county to teach elementary school, but judging by the business acumen she showed after Hurricane Katrina, I've often wondered if she chose the wrong profession. There she was, looking out at her classroom one morning after listening to the news on her way into work, when she realized that she could take twenty-three kids at three-dollars-and-fifty-cents per lunch and raise more than four-hundred dollars a week. That's a pretty hefty return from a fourth grade class.

Just about all of us signed her paper, pledging to give over our lunch money. It really makes a person feel good to be a part of something that helps others like that. Not only that, but when I told my mother what we were doing, she liked the idea so much that she gave me an extra three-dollars-and-fifty-cents every day to put in Mrs. Terfel's mason jar. Every morning I could march up to the front of the class with the other kids and put *my* lunch money in Mrs. Terfel's jar, and every afternoon I could take my mother's extra money and buy a hot lunch in the cafeteria. In this way, I could relieve Mrs. Terfel of the burden of having to fix me a sandwich. It was an arrangement in everyone's best interest. I never did like peanut butter and jelly very much.

It had taken less than an hour for mankind to find a way to put an angel in a grave. At the moment he had landed, Leonard's robe had been so bright that, when the sun struck him at just the right angle, the white fabric flashed like streaks of lightning. Such is the quality of heavenly thread and tailors. This sheen, however, was quickly lost as the robe became covered with the same dull film of dirt that coated his human companion.

Now that the angel stood shoveling dirt beside the man, he could hear the mortal's ragged, heaving breath and smell the stale body odor of one long overdue for a wash.

“Abdo,” Leonard said, indicating his new friend, “has something terrible happened here?”

“Many terrible things have happened here,” Abdo replied without breaking the rhythm of his work, “the things that you know.”

Leonard confessed his ignorance.

Abdo did pause now and viewed the angel incredulously. Before the world ended, one of the great fallacies commonly entertained by the suffering was that their pain should be of concern to the rest of us. This was ridiculous, of course. Everyone has their own battle to fight, and it’s impossible to say that one person’s is any greater or more urgent than another’s.

Abdo explained that his country, Yemen, was caught between the interests of two of its more powerful regional neighbours. Yemen itself wasn’t a very important place, but it was a convenient location for its neighbours to squabble for dominance. The opponents were as detached as two gamblers playing a round of Texas Hold-Em. In Yemen, they could throw as many chips as they wanted into the bubbling pot, watch the stakes grow and grow, and never worry about endangering any of their own people with the outcome.

Many cards had been laid on the table in this game through the years. The ace of them all was when one of Yemen’s neighbours, with the help of some very wealthy friends, decided to prevent any food from entering the country. They blocked all the ports that would have allowed the distribution

of sustenance and humanitarian aid. They also blew up infrastructure, irrigation systems and medical clinics. They dropped a great many bombs and very effectively. Before the world ended, it had become amazing what a modern person could do to others when they put their head to it.

As a result of the campaign, many children were starving to death. The ones that weren't dying of hunger were being killed by the lack of ground water and the diseases that came from trying to drink the filthy liquids that remained in the ruins of the irrigation system. It was one of these diseases that probably finished off the daughter whose grave Abdo was preparing. Blocking all the ports and dropping bombs like that *was* a dirty thing for Yemen's neighbour to do. But there's nothing that we could have done about it.

"There is *some* good news about the world ending," Abdo said, dirt spilling over the rimmed edge of his shovel back into the grave.

Leonard looked up. Nothing made his angel eyes light up quite like the phrase *good news*.

"Well, if the world has really ended, we might as well kill our goat."

"Kill your goat?"

"Yes, we have a milking goat. If we slaughter her, we can have a proper meal for the guests after we bury Jamala. That will make my

wife happy. She has always wanted one of her children to have a proper funeral.”

That was, without a doubt, the saddest good news Leonard had ever heard.

Thursdays was sloppy joes in the cafeteria. Even kids that didn’t normally pray before meals would bow their heads for a few moments of reverent silence on Sloppy Joe Thursday. My friends and I were all of one accord that there was nothing worse than having to eat Soggy Joes.

I was standing in the cafeteria line, offering up my own petitions for structural integrity, when Dotty Gunder greeted me with an elbow dug deep into my ribs. “Hey,” she said, “didn’t you sign Mrs. Terfel’s pledge in class?”

“I certainly did,” I said proudly. “*And* I put my three-dollars-and-fifty-cents in the jar today, too.”

Dotty squinted at me. For a lot of us, walking up to Mrs. Terfel’s desk and clanking three-dollars-and-fifty-cents into her mason jar had become a badge of honour.

“Then how come...”

I stopped Dotty with a raise of my finger. Gosh, it felt good to do that to Dotty Gunder. “My mom gave me extra money so that I could buy lunch,” I explained.

Dotty squinted deeper. It was obvious, even then, that she needed glasses, but somehow she wouldn’t get a pair until middle school. “Wasn’t the



point *supposed* to be that by trading hot lunch for peanut butter and jelly you were saving money to help the little boys and girls in New Orleans?”

“Yes, that was the point, and I gave my money.”

“No, you gave your *mom’s* money. You’re using *your* money to eat sloppy joe’s.”

I looked back at Dotty and her vulgar insinuation that putting money in that jar hadn’t cost me anything. I gave her a squint of my own. “Didn’t I see *you* sign Mrs. Terfel’s paper in class, too?”

She didn’t have to say anything in response. I knew that I had her. Just like me, Dotty had asked her mother for extra lunch money that week.

We looked at each other silently as the cafeteria line ahead of us shuffled forward. Like opposing gunfighters lowering their Colt 45s in a dusty saloon, we slowly relaxed our mutual squinting.

“Hey,” Dotty said, finally, digging her elbow once more into my side and pointing at the stack of clean, blue lunch trays. “You’re up.”

That is my earliest memory of Dotty Gunder. I suppose I knew, then and there that there was something special about her. As it went, though, I wouldn’t tell her I thought so until our paths crossed again years later.

Mostly, while the two shoveled, Abdo talked about his children in short, grunting sentences. The only thing people like to talk about more than their woes is their children. Besides Jamala, his dying daughter, he had another girl who had been born too crippled to have gone to school (if the schools had ever reopened) and too deformed to ever get married (should she have lived so long). If you ask me, *her* world ending doesn't seem to have been a great loss; but that was something that Leonard would have to see more about later. Abdo had other kids, too. There was the son who had a building fall on him during one of the bombings. He was buried beside the tree stump to the left. Then there was the daughter with the really bad fever. They had tried to take her to the doctor in Hajjah, but she had died on the way, and was buried where her legs gave out. And on and on. It's hard to keep stories about other people's kids straight.

Leonard frowned, surprised at the pervasively melancholic tone of the picture Abdo painted. "There is still so much darkness in the world," the angel said, shaking his head. "I thought - with how the Christians have shone their light so faithfully - that there would be less of it by now."

Abdo hesitated. "The what?"

"The Christians; the followers of Jesus."

"The prophet Jesus?"

Leonard's head cocked to the side. As he did, in the rising heat of the morning, two beads of sweat dripped from his ear onto the white fabric

covering his round angel shoulders. “Why, yes, I suppose you could call him a prophet; but he is so much more than that.”

“What else?”

Leonard’s mouth opened, closed, and then opened again as he found himself sputtering. “He-he is the lamb that takes away the sins of the world; the fulfillment of the law; the Anointed One; the Son of God.”

Halfway through sixth grade, my science teacher, Mr. Pendergast, tired as he was from the scratches on the old one, became the proud recipient of a brand new three-foot-by-twelve-foot chalkboard. I was there the day he wrote his name on it for the first time. I mention this because, as it turns out, Mr. Pendergast’s chalkboard wasn’t half as blank as the look on Abdo’s face at that moment.

Everything that Abdo knew about Jesus came from a book that was written by a man in a nearby town hundreds of year ago. That man hadn’t known any real Christians himself but had picked up some ideas about Jesus that had been muddled through exchanges on the spice trade across Asia. For instance, some traveling merchants had told him that Christians believe in three gods, one of which was Mary, Jesus’s mother. That’s what they told him about Christians and that’s what he wrote down. That ridiculous idea, which Abdo - a monotheist -

knew to be false, was all that he had heard about Christians.

There is no such thing as a headache in heaven, but Leonard was quickly learning of their reality on planet earth. He had known, of course, that not everyone was going to be a Christian when the Christ returned. The Scriptures had made that clear enough. But to have never *heard* the most fundamental truths regarding the Christ was an entirely unsettling proposition. It had been more than two-thousand years since Jesus had taken on flesh. Everyone, he thought, was supposed to have at least been shown the offered reconciliation between God and man, whether they wanted any part of it or not. You may be surprised to learn how naive some angels can be.

“The Christians in your village *must* have explained these things to you better than that.”

“We don’t have any Christians in my town,” Abdo said. “Everyone in my village follows a different religion.”

Leonard released his grip from the wooden shaft of the dull shovel he had been holding and looked up from the scarred earth to the crumpled milk-carton ruins of the town behind him. For the first time, he could feel the sweat bleeding through the white robe of his own angel back, and the sensation piqued a bleak awareness within him. Was it really possible that the cloud had somehow landed him in the only town in the whole wide world which had never been penetrated by the Kingdom of God?

It was a dark revelation, but it was one that began to make sense. He raised a newly blistered hand to cover his silent mouth, as if doing so could halt the disappointment that he could feel rushing through his angel body. Leonard thought it a very irritating thing for the cloud to do on the morning of the most important day since the Christ's departure.

4.

Like most other people, after having passed through the conveyer belts of the public education system I found myself, happily, at the doorstep of college life. College, as promised, was an invigorating place to meet new people, debate fresh ideas and enjoy the freedoms of youth. Of all the wonderful things that college offered, what perhaps sticks with me most is the sensation of living a life saturated with unending potential. There was an energy in the collegiate environment which nothing else could match.

I remember this feeling welling up inside me early in my first semester. I was on my way to dinner with some friends, recently acquired during a mandatory meeting at my dorm, when I happened upon a club fair at the student center. I entered the fair wide-eyed, my student ID swaying freely from the new lanyard around my neck. I walked down rows of carefully prepared booths decorated festively with helium balloons. Each booth had a table cluttered with brightly coloured trinkets behind which stood cheery sophomore club officers who alternated laughing at private jokes and yelling to be heard over the chaos of the crowd.

There was a club, it seemed, for everyone: photographers; archers; even those whose mouths still watered with the promised power offered by student government positions and who licked their lips with dreams of political ambition. I collected magnets, pens and even a red coffee mug that I would box up ritualistically and move with me forever thereafter, without ever drinking from it a single time.

Near the far end of the second aisle, my hands already full of cheap plunder, I must have taken a lingering pause at a booth manned by two girls in black berets. It took little more than that for me to find myself the proud recipient of a yellow shirt upon which was a picture of the Eiffel Tower with a raised font which read *C'est la Vie*. And just

like that, my name was forever immortalized on the roster of the French Language and Culture Club.

Satisfied that it was adequately prepared, Abdo ascended from his daughter's grave and beckoned the angel to accompany him on the return to the village. It was not a long way from the grave to Abdo's home, but it was a walk the man insisted that the two take together. As Abdo had been the first to encounter the stranger to his village, it was now his responsibility to care for him. Before the world ended, hospitality was an important part of Yemeni culture.

They walked in silence in the middle of the road. Ever since the war began, it was rare to see any cars either coming or going from the village. Every now and again an army would come through, declaring the town conquered on behalf of so-and-so or such-and-such. Months would go by and it would be recaptured in the name of someone else. Death at the hands of a conquering army was a threat that had driven many of the residents away, some into hiding in the surrounding mountains and caves, others to refugee camps or, if they could make it, across the borders to a more stable country. Families, like Abdo's, who stayed in their village, were left in a vulnerable seclusion. Armies would come and go and return, each time finding, impossibly, more trophies to take away with them.



The sun was growing higher now, and the shadows of both angel and man were short against the pitted blacktop. Here and there, fig trees stood like monuments, their deep roots proclaiming resistance against the violence that had upturned the even deeper roots of the people who tended them. The thorn bushes did the same. As of late, both had borne equal portions of fruit.

For his part, Leonard found himself perplexed in a way that he had never considered possible. As they walked, he rested his trumpet against his angel shoulder, tapping its side in the same restless way that he would when he became frustrated practicing a complicated piece of music. From the corner of his mouth, his lip began to twitch. His lips always did that when his mind bore down upon a thought. You see, Leonard had no illusions about the depravity of man and the depths of the evil that could envelope the world. Of course he knew these things; he had seen fallen angels descend to the depths of hell itself. He had heard stories of the men who bargained with them. On the other hand, having spent the vast majority of earth's existence enwrapped in God's consummate goodness, he had a particular vision as to how the creator's love might transform the planet. It wasn't a realistic vision, but it was the one he had always most loved imagining.

As they neared the village, Abdo stepped in front of Leonard to navigate the path. The angel

could see that the man's feet were heavy with the burden of responsibility and his shoulders hunched forward with the weight of death. For some reason, it always seems that the wounded should be the wiser for their trouble; in a fair world, pain would always bring some reward. But the burden that Abdo felt upon his shoulders was best seen in his eyes, and they did not reveal wisdom so much as bewilderment. A bewilderment of experience. A tiredness of existence. His world had been a desperate, grinding place. His furtive glances revealed him to be small in his own eyes. And that was his wisdom.

It had always been my intention to invest myself fully in French Club. I knew, even then, that when I was sitting across from someone in middle-management who was considering my suitedness for a job, they would weigh much more than the GPA that adorned the header of my *curriculum vitae*. With French Club, however, the closest I ever made it to attending an actual meeting was showing up in my yellow Eiffel Tower shirt for a picture that was found in the university directories.

Don't get me wrong, I was as interested in gouda cheese and Cabernet Sauvignon as the next guy, but there was so much else going on in college that, somehow, those meetings never made it to the top of my priority list. Over time, I was most keenly reminded of my association with the club when I

received their periodic newsletters detailing the club's going-ons and upcoming events.

Back before the world ended, one had to be careful when putting one's name and contact information on club rosters; those things could follow a person around for untold years. Even after graduation, every now and again I would get a call asking me to come back for reunions and make donations and annoying things like that.

All that said, even if I didn't develop conversational skills in the language of love, it would be wrong to conclude that my association with French Club was completely useless.

While the streets in the village had always been small, ever since the bombings, many of them had become nearly impassible. Over here, a retaining wall spilled into the street; over there, the burned carcass of a blue Japanese minivan dammed the right side of the road. Every now and again, as they maneuvered the streets, Abdo would point a finger to the ground, alerting the angel to sidestep a particularly deep pothole or to avoid a notably fiendish shard of glass.

Leonard clutched his trumpet tighter. "I don't understand it," he said at last, as much to himself as to the man beside him.

Abdo swiveled his head to acknowledge the entry of conversation.

“I don’t understand how you can have a town with no Christians.”

“Why is that?”

“The Christians have gone into *every* town. They have told the whole world about their teacher Jesus. They have shown it his love. As Jesus left no one to suffer alone, neither have they left anyone to suffer alone.”

Abdo turned fully around now, stopping the angel in his path. His eyes went first to the trumpet, still gleaming golden in the sun. They then followed the angel’s sleeves north, watching as Leonard wiped the sweat from his forehead with the back of his hand. The angel examined the brown stain that the motion had left on his once white garments. Abdo clenched his jaw hard, causing a pulsation to emit visibly from the right side of his face. It was not of his personality to look another directly in the eye, but he did so now. The look was long and yearning, as when a man wishes for the horizon’s mirage. His heavy tongue licked again at his thin lips, leaving a thick foam that would soon dry into a crust at the corners of his mouth. He held the gaze with the same half-hopeful expression with which he had earlier asked Leonard for a drink of water.

“Where would you find a Christian - *any* person - who would ask for a part of this?” He jabbed his chin from one side of the broken village to the other.

Leonard was adamant. “A *Christian* would.”

Abdo shook his head doubtfully.

Leonard knew, of course that, seeing as how the world was over, explanations would do Abdo no good. However, he couldn't stop himself from trying to explain to the man what made the Christians so different from anyone he had ever encountered. Motioning Abdo to give him a minute to explain, the angel cleared his throat. According to Leonard, this is how it all went down:

Hundreds and hundreds of years before Jesus was born, there was a prophet named Isaiah. He told the people that when the messiah came, he was going to enact something called the Year of the Lord's Favor. Isaiah said it was going to be *very* good news for the poor. Captives were going to be freed, there was going to be liberty for the oppressed and even the blind were going to see again.

The Prophet Jesus, the son of God, is the messiah about whom Isaiah foretold. One day, in his hometown of Nazareth, he announced that he was enacting the Jubilee about which Isaiah had spoken. Most of the people didn't believe him, but there were a handful who did. They listened to his teaching and saw the way he treated others, and they were drawn to him. They wanted Jesus to be their teacher and to show them how to be like him. Jesus told them that he would do that, but first they had to give up everything they had, leave their jobs and their families, and follow him. He had strict rules

for his followers. One of them was that, no matter what it cost, they had to try their hardest to live like he did. No compromises. *That's* what it was going to take to bring the Year of the Lord's Favor into the world.

This went on for a few years before Jesus was killed for declaring that, as God's son, he was equal to God. At first, when he died, his followers were sad. They went back to their hometowns and their old jobs. But then Jesus rose from the dead, and that changed everything. By rising from the dead, he had made a way for all of creation to be reconciled with its creator. He promised to come back to earth in the future, but until then, he told his followers to go into all the world being just like him, so that when people met them, they would know what he was like. By so doing, when Jesus came back to earth, everybody would have the chance to welcome him and celebrate the end of the world as it was and the inauguration of a new era.

Jesus warned his followers that, because they acted like him, they were going to be treated just like he had been treated. A servant is not greater than his master, Jesus said. If people persecuted him, they would persecute them, too. Jesus was right about that. For a long time, most of his followers were killed for trying to be like him. But, along the way, a funny thing happened. As they died, they were replaced by others who saw how they lived and how they had been transformed by the love of God. These people were also drawn to

the idea of being little Jesuses and decided to spend their lives liberating the oppressed in every way they could. All of them were like buried seeds that grew into beautiful, multiplying plants, filling the whole world. Everywhere these plants went they produced fruit that nourished the world and reconciled creation with its Creator, instituting the Kingdom of God.

“And that,” Leonard concluded, not sounding terribly different from a parent explaining to a child the origin of babies, “is where Christians come from.”

Abdo shrugged. Whatever the world might have been, it had been. Whatever the Christians might have done, they had done it. None of it had touched his life, and none of it was of much material significance now.

“Up there,” he pointed, “that is my home, where my daughter is.”

5.

In my sophomore year, two friends and I moved into an off-campus apartment, taking with us little more than our hampers full of dirty clothes, posters from old kung fu movies and three cheap futons which formed an inevitable perimeter around the flat-screen TV in our living room.

I was sitting on the least stained of these three futons with my roommate who (somewhat pretentiously) would introduce himself as a pre-law student. We were both applying for summer



internships at the time and had decided to proofread one another's *curriculum vitae*.

"Why do you have French Club listed as one of your activities?" He asked.

"Because I joined the club," I said, proudly lifting the yellow fabric of the shirt from my chest so that he could better examine its well-worn accompanying text.

"You've never been to a meeting."

"Not yet."

"Do you even speak French?"

I shook my head. "The club is for proponents of both French language *and* culture."

"Are *you* a proponent of French culture?" The lilt of his voice indicated the challenge of a burgeoning prosecuting attorney.

I shrugged. "I like gouda cheese as much as the next guy."

"That's Dutch."

I could feel my heart climbing in my chest, as if rising to counter an oncoming attack. "I've been to Paris."

"Paris, Texas doesn't count."

I had an uncle who lived in Paris, Texas. When I was little, my family used to visit him just about every summer. I still don't know why I had told my roommates that.

"You know, if all you got out of French club was the shirt, it really doesn't give you much right to put it as an activity on your CV."

It was my turn to challenge. "*You* 've never been to France, either, have you?"

"No," he said slowly, "but I'm not the resident proponent of French culture."

I pounced, sensing it was my turn to take the offensive. I told him that as one whose name was nowhere to be found on the club roster, he was the *last* person qualified to tell me what did or did not qualify as being an active member of the club. He disputed that. As a self-proclaimed pre-law student, he thought it was his job to argue about everything.

Before Leonard's angel eyes had a chance to adjust to the dim lighting of the bedroom, he could feel a tightening grip around his forearm. The palm of the hand that held him was calloused with lines cut from the sort of long, winding valleys that would drive a fortune teller nuts. The hand's backside was veinous and had the cracked appearance of earth that had dried too fast; the consequence of a hot cooking oil spill in early childhood. Many of the women there had similar scars. The hand was exceptionally bony and its grip surprisingly strong.

"Please help my little girl," the owner of the vice-grip hand said.

Leonard did not respond immediately. There were no less than nine women clustered in the room. He eyed each one in turn, using as his guide the ray of light that filtered through the bedroom's lone window: an opaque pane of smoked glass the exact size and shape of the cinderblocks from which the rest of the room had been constructed. Beneath this window, two women wore scarves that covered

their hair. Another woman, sitting in a white plastic chair in the corner to the right of them, was dressed entirely in black, her face hidden except for a long, single slit through which her eyes peered silently out at the world. She rocked herself back and forth, crying silent, hidden tears. Beside her, in front of the broken television set, stood another woman, similarly dressed. Still others sat on the edge of the bed, facing like sentinels in all directions, as if somehow guarding the new corpse which lay under a heap of blankets. The room was even hotter than it had been outside.

Leonard had never seen a corpse before and he was immediately surprised by how different a person looked in death than they would upon arrival to heaven. There was a resemblance, certainly, but there was also an indescribable something that was missing. He shivered.

“Please help my little girl,” the voice repeated, more urgently.

It was much quieter now than when he had entered. Angels can have a chilling effect on conversation when they appear in a room.

The women were waiting, no doubt, to see what Leonard might do. All of them, of course, except for Amal, the girl’s mother. She squeezed Leonard’s forearm harder, with both hands now, pleading him onward. “*Please*, won’t you help my little girl?”

Wordlessly, he separated himself from the mother and walked the long way around the side of the bed, so as to be able to see her dead daughter's face. The girl's head was tilted back at a long, oblique angle from her neck and her mouth was still open. These twin features gave the distinct impression that, even now, she was straining for her last breath. Though the bedroom was little more than a preheated oven dialed to three-hundred-and-fifty degrees, she was nonetheless buried beneath a pile of itching blue blankets.

Abdo had said she was twelve, but her small frame seemingly belonged to a girl much younger. Malnutrition will do that to a kid. Although he did not try, when he reached for her hand, Leonard knew that he could easily wrap his thumb and forefinger around the thickest part of her arm.

He looked back at Amal, peering at him on her knees from the foot of the bed. Her eyes were red and glassy. The angel's vision had acclimated to the room's dim light enough to appreciate in her face the endless capacity for suffering with which mothers have been endowed. He then looked down, rather dumbly, at his trumpet. He reflected momentarily on the limitations of his repertoire. Leonard was not an angel to whom God had ordained the power to extend life and the power to cut it short. There was such an angel, but he

couldn't so much as play Hot Cross Buns. Strengths and weaknesses; I suppose we all have them.

Leonard knew, helplessly, that he was out of his league on this one.

"I only play the trumpet," he apologized, "I can't do anything for your daughter."

Amal wept.

The sound of her mourning filled every crack in the cinderblock walls. It reflected off of the pane of smoked glass back into the hot, dreary room. It was a strained and desperate cry. The odd thing about it was that, when she cried, she sounded as human as anybody in the world might sound at the death of their child.

Amal composed herself. Her long fingers covered her eyes and then trailed down over her sunken cheeks and thin, colourless lips. "If you haven't come to help her," she began, her still shaking voice forcing itself to complete the sentence, "what are you doing here?"

"I've come to proclaim the good news," Leonard responded, lifting his trumpet like a farmer at a county fair showing off a prized squash. "You see, I have a song and something to tell you about the world ending." He looked around the room again. A part of him wanted to ask the women staring back at him if any of them were Christians,

but a larger part sensed that now was not the proper time.

“Good news?” Amal’s voice raised slightly. “What *possible* good news could there be?”

A thick, heaving silence hung over the room, the women all holding their breath for fear of missing the angel’s words. Foregoing his musical introduction, Leonard began to tell them about the return of the Christ and the commencement of the Judgement.

These were matters about which the women were even less informed than Abdo had been. I imagine that’s because, statistically speaking, of the nine women present, only three of them had any semblance of literacy. Yemen had a dreadful literacy rate, which is terribly unfortunate. But there’s nothing that we could have done about it.

A quick assessment of their faces revealed that they were neither Christians nor receiving the news of the impending Judgment with joy. There never were, I suppose, many messages that everyone on earth could equally receive with thanksgiving.

“Good news aside,” Leonard concluded, “I am sorry about your daughter, and I am very sorry that there is nothing I can do to help.” He clasped his hands together apologetically.

Amal nodded, a slow accepting nod. Yemeni women, too, held hospitality high among the virtues. Neither death nor an ill timed end of

creation were excuse to shame a visitor. “It is not your fault. The other one couldn’t help her, either.”

Leonard could almost feel the evaluating stares coming from every woman in the room. Their closed mouths hummed in agreement.

In turn, the angel’s eyes narrowed in confusion. “What do you mean *‘the other one?’*”

When I was little, my favorite part of the jungle gym was the monkey bars. The park near my house had a perfect set. They were just high enough off the ground that it felt dangerous, but not so high that a fall would render one incapable of a second trial. Doing the monkey bars was a tiring endeavor and one that required mental fortitude. That being said, the sensation of flying from one rung to the next induced a particularly exhilarating feeling in the gut that nothing else in childhood could quite match.

I mention this only because, since the onset of puberty, both my gut and my mind have clung to the images of certain women the way that I used to cling to the rungs of the monkey bars. In many ways, in fact, the two experiences were very similar. I don’t think I am alone in that. Back before the world ended, when you asked someone who was single if they were interested in anyone, they would often tell you, flatly, *no*. They were lying, every time.

I know this, because it is a lie that I myself indulged. The truth is, there was always someone whose name I kept filed away in a secret part of my brain. I would turn the thought of her over in my mind, thinking what it would be like to make her mine. She would be a rung on my monkey bars. Sometimes, I would be stuck on a bar for years at a time; other times, I would only dangle at the bar for a couple of days before I had gathered enough momentum to make the leap to the next bar down the line.

The point is, no matter how unrealistic the prospect of actual romance was, single people always kept someone in mind. Once, waiting for a doctor's appointment, I spoke eight words to a woman reading an outdated magazine beside me, and then spent the next three weeks devising a plot to, first, learn her name and second, marry her.

Incidentally, it was in this window of time that I started a new job and a familiar face from my childhood drove this waiting room crush from my mind. I swung one monkey bar closer to the end of the line. The familiar face was that of my old classmate, Dotty Gunder, who was holding a post in middle management.



6.

The woman wearing a yellow headscarf with orange flowers on it was the youngest mourner in the bedroom. It was easy enough to tell her age in relation to the other women. Once, when I was little, someone told me that you could always tell how old a felled tree was by counting the number of rings it took to get to the center. Women in the village were kind of like that, only instead of counting rings, you added up how many babies they had buried. It was a terrible way to measure a

woman's age. The woman in the yellow headscarf had only buried one. I don't remember her name, although I wish I did.

When one left the bedroom where the women mourned, there were two options for where one could go next. If one were to step to the left, one would be in the small, empty living room, with its two wood-framed sofas placed in opposing corners and an end table with a single kerosine lantern atop it. The delicate lantern glass had been immaculately cleaned and, still, the toxic residue from the burned wicks had stained the blue ventilator cap irreparably black. If one stepped to the right, one would enter a short, narrow hallway and find at the end of it a kitchen, bathed in sunlight. From the kitchen, one could go out the backdoor into the yard where the chickens and goats were kept.

The woman in the yellow scarf closed the bedroom door quietly and led Leonard to the right. The length of the hallway was no more than that of a very tall man, and no wider than the width of Mr. Apple Dumpling, the nickname we gave to our next door neighbour when I was a kid.

In the hallway, she stopped, presently, at a green door behind which was a closet. She leaned toward the angel and addressed him in a low whisper. The whisper could have been even lower if she had pleased; angels have exceptional hearing. "Now, I want you to know that we didn't *make* him

go in there and the door isn't locked. He could leave at any time."

Leonard nodded his solemn acceptance of her preface as she gripped the handle of the closet door and began to twist it. "He said he *wanted* it this way."

She opened the door slowly; *cautiously* even, standing protectively between Leonard and the figure waiting silently on the other side. The figure was standing with his back to the closet door, but even without showing his face, it was obvious that he wasn't human. It wasn't until the door had opened fully and was penetrated by God's own light that he finally began turning in slow, shuffling steps to face the outside world. He was outfitted, much like Leonard, in plain sandals and a long white robe. Had they been made to stand in a police line-up of suspects, the most notable difference between the two would have been that, instead of a trumpet, the closet-figure held a single ancient feather and a scroll the size of one of the old dumbbells my dad used to keep in the basement. Tucked imperceptibly into the generous sleeves of his immaculate white gown were several more just like it. It was a strange day on planet earth, indeed.

The figure extended his hand in a shy greeting. "Hello," he said, "I'm Kenny. I was Jamala's recorder."

As a point of clarification, there are, in fact, two different types of recorder angels. Leonard had always been thankful that God hadn't apportioned him to either order. The first type of recorder angel was the sort that played the recorder. Of all the different musicians which could populate the heavenly band, I don't know why God wanted so many whose sole talent was to blow into that particular instrument. It isn't like being in heaven makes the recorder any more tolerable than it is in a third grade classroom.

Thankfully, Kenny didn't belong to this type. He was the *other* type of recorder: an angel whose job it was to document the deeds of every man, woman and child on planet earth and send them upstairs for review.

Every word and action, day and night, from life's first cry until final breath was written by his hand. It was a job done with no breaks, no vacations and not even the luxury of carrying on side conversations with the other angels who were performing the same job. Although these angels were, by the nature of their work, never alone, their job was endlessly solitary. More often than not, the angels who carried out this work were most comfortable maintaining such isolation.

"What are *you* doing here?" Leonard asked. It was an imprecise question. Leonard knew, of course, what recorders did.

“I’m standing in a closet.” Kenny answered with a precision so exact as to be unhelpful.

Leonard apologized. “Let me rephrase.” He knew that angels of Kenny’s type were very literal. Literalness was an understandably desirable trait for fulfilling their duties. “*Why* are you in a closet?”

“Because I feel visible.”

“You *are* visible.”

“This has never happened to me before, and I don’t like the way it feels,” Kenny said, evenly. “*Dave* doesn’t have to be visible.” At this point, Kenny pointed beyond the woman in the yellow headscarf, apparently directing attention to some unseen angel.

Leonard noted that it was a fair objection. Every single person in North Yemen had a recorder, but as far as Leonard had experienced, Kenny was the only one who could be seen by mortal man.

“Why are you visible?”

“I don’t know. There was a little girl who died here today. Her name was Jamala. I was her recorder. After she passed, I took her file up to records - just like I always do - and requested my next assignment. But Anthony - who manages such things - said there *were* no next assignments. Next thing I know, I’m back in the room where Jamala had died. The women there - who had been crying - were suddenly screaming at me. I immediately recognized my visibility and became uncomfortable.

I asked this woman if I might be left in a solitary place, and she brought me here.”

“That’s incredible,” Leonard said.

“*Unprecedented*,” Kenny corrected, gently, “but why might it be that there are no more assignments?”

“It may very well be on account of the mystical moment that we are currently sharing in the transition.” Leonard offered.

“The transition to what?”

“Haven’t you heard?”

Kenny shook his head slowly.

Leonard straightened himself and inhaled deeply. “Behold!” He began.

7.

At the morning's onset, Leonard had not anticipated that coaxing a fellow angel from the closet to join him in the land of the living would rank amongst his day's greatest accomplishments. But very little of the day had gone as he anticipated. Earth was always an unpredictable place.

By the time the two angels emerged from the kitchen door into the yard, the sun was past its highest point and had begun its long journey back toward the horizon. Long shadows lengthened from

the abandoned chicken coop towards the shed in the far corner where the milking goat was housed.

Amal, who had excused herself from her companions to share a quiet moment of reflection with her husband, was crouched beside her goat's hind quarters. It must have been the mangiest goat in the world. In fact, if he hadn't known better, Leonard easily could have confused it with being the first evidence of the resurrection of the dead. She was a walking skeleton of an animal; her bony haunches stuck out at peculiar angles and her skin was patchy and discoloured.

The goat stood patiently as Amal seized a teat between her thumb and forefinger and squeezed firmly. Long lines of milk squirted like a blast from a Super Soaker into the silver pail between the goat's legs.

Hearing the angels as they approached, the poor mother raised her eyes and, for a moment - when Leonard's eyes met hers - he could glimpse how far away she had been transported by her thoughts while her hands worked patiently at the goat's udder. Maybe she was back in the bedroom with her daughter Jamala, whose body was being washed for burial. Or, maybe she had been on the road to Hajjah, or maybe she was digging for her son in a heap of stones and hopelessness. Wherever it was, it was clearly far from the frothy white liquid she sprayed into the bottom of the pail. Then she blinked and the moment had passed. Leonard kept



looking, but Amal had cloaked herself with a lowered gaze.

“My guests,” she said with a detached hospitality, placing two fingers on the milk pail’s lip to ensure the security of its contents, “what can I do for you?”

“Really,” Leonard began with a small, inviting smile, “we were going to ask you the same question. You see, Kenny and I were talking, and we were wondering what could be done to prepare for Jamala’s funeral.”

Amal shooed away a horse fly. “It only takes one person to milk a goat. But, maybe, when I am finished, Abdo could use your hands to help with the slaughter.” Something like pride flushed the mother’s face, “you know, we are going to have a *proper* funeral for my Jamala.”

“It would be our honour” Leonard offered on behalf of both himself and Kenny.

Amal rose momentarily and straightened her back. She nodded her gratitude at Leonard and then addressed, for the first time, the angel on the right. “My friend says that you watched over my daughter.”

“Not watched *over*,” Kenny clarified, “just watched. There was another angel that watched *over* her.” Mistaking surveillance for security was a common confusion, even among angels. He reached

into the dilated sleeve of his robe and revealed a roll of parchment. "I used scrolls like these."

"For what?"

"Record keeping purposes."

"Records of what?"

"Everything she ever did and said."

"Does everyone have an angel doing that?"

Amal's eyes widened.

Kenny nodded. Even Amal, although she couldn't see it, had at that moment an angel - very much like Kenny - writing dialogue at a furious pace on a half-empty scroll.

"What do you do with them?"

"I leave them in heaven for the Judge to review."

Amal froze. The milk, which had been hitting the pail at pleasing, rhythmic intervals, slowed to a drip. The teaching of her faith had gone to great pains to emphasize the severity of God's holy judgment. Even before she had received sustenance from goats like the one she currently employed, as a child, she had drunk the fear of hell at her own mother's breast. It was in the fabric that built her bones and they were chilled by the angel's words.

Her voice dropped to a whisper. "I hope the Judge will be gracious to my Jamala," she wrung her sweating hands together. "She was only a little girl, but she was a good child."

When I was a teenager, there were two ways that you could get yourself a sleeveless shirt. The first was to buy a shirt that had no sleeves: pre-made sleeveless, hemmed. Only those living on the fringes of society would dare purchase such a thing. The second way to get a sleeveless shirt was to take a regular sleeved t-shirt and pull as hard as you could, one hand on the collar and the other hand at the sleeve until the two ripped away from each other. This way was unquestionably cooler, but it took a fair amount of strength to separate the sleeve from the seam.

I mention this, only because Leonard found himself at that moment torn just like an old t-shirt sleeve. Pulling at him with the one hand was his instinct to reassure the grieving mother that she had no need to fear for her little daughter's soul; to tell her that the Judge was known to be compassionate and gracious, abounding in love. Pulling at him with the other hand was his knowledge of the centrality of faith in Jesus to assure the salvation of sinful humans; God's justice required nothing less. *No man came to the Father except through Jesus.* Only a messenger himself, he deferred from offering the woman guarantees on behalf of the Judge. Angels need to be more careful about what they say in God's name than people do. It's a terrible thing for an angel to misrepresent the Almighty.

Amal filled in the silent space. “She’s gone dry,” she said, lifting the pail from beneath the goat’s udder and turning its angle to inspect the disappointing yield. “She doesn’t give as much as she used to,” she apologized. “I will tell Abdo he can come and kill her. The things he will need are in the shed, if you would like to bring them.”

Leonard clasped his hands together, grateful for the invitation to be of use. Trumpet in hand, he stepped towards the shed. Unlike the home, which was made of concrete, it was made of earthen bricks.

“The girl can’t speak,” Amal cautioned as she moved, pail in hand, towards the house. “She may be startled by the opened door.”

Leonard’s brow furrowed at the suggestion and he opened the shed door with an increased measure of trepidation.

8.

As a kid, Dotty Gunder had famously sharp elbows and symmetric little freckles beneath her eyes. We had never been terribly close growing up, but I had always liked the freckles. I never told her that and we didn't stay in touch when we both moved away for college.

A few years later, back in our hometown, when I accepted a position at the corporate office of Fuller Groceries, the person who hired me said I should report to Ms. Gunder. Immediately, I remembered the freckles.

Dotty had started with Greg Fuller's company two years prior and had quickly risen to a relatively senior position. She was assigned the unenviable task of explaining the finer points of the business to me. That's when it happened.

We were in a conference room with one of those long mahogany tables in its center. Lining the walls, as decorations, were a series of posters from the archives of the Fuller Grocery advertising history. At the back of the room was a map of our own fair little city with colourful pins pushed into it.

"These are our locations in the local market," Dotty said casually.

I looked at the map intently, trying to find it important. It was my first day, and it's always hard to know on a first day how relatively important everything is.

The town had changed little during the years I had been away. My family had always lived on the west side of the river where Fuller had four locations: 37th Street; Cyprus Avenue; Westpark Boulevard and Dreyfus Lane. For one reason or another, I had frequented all of these locations over the years. They were noted on the map by blue pins. Clustered near them were a handful of red pins. "What are these?"

"Those are our competitors. We have to keep track of who all is selling where, you know."

Dotty was standing close to me, her hair was pulled back, and I liked the shape of her ear.

The competition on the west side of the city seemed pretty thick. There were grocery stores every few streets; sometimes more than one.

“Did anyone ever think about putting a new location on the east side of the river?” I asked, pointing my finger at the lone red pin in the center of that half of town.

Dotty looked at me like I had kicked her dog or forgotten the punchline to our hometown’s inside joke. “No, mostly we find it best to stay on the west side. Don’t you?”

She smiled at me encouragingly - knowingly even - and I smiled back. Mother Nature had kindly softened Dotty’s elbows and she smelled like roses.

As soon as Leonard cracked the door open, he could smell the must of the goat’s mangy coat and the feces which perfused the shed’s dark interior. Dozens of flies, which also called the shed home, burst into life, greeting the angel from every dropping and corner. Timidly, Leonard stepped into the space. At first, his eyes were trained to look for the bench upon which Amal had said he would find Abdo’s blue bucket and sharp knives. As he adjusted to the dim light, though, his attention was drawn to the floor to the side of the bench, where a little girl in a dirty Mickey Mouse t-shirt quietly played a game of her own invention.

It would be polite to say that Leonard didn't immediately notice any of the girl's deformities. You know, that because he was a spiritual being he only saw the girl's heart and not the outward appearance and yada yada yada. But the truth is, the deformities were the first thing that Leonard noticed when he looked at her. I guess we can't blame him for that. Even Jesus knew a leper when he saw one. The girl's legs had a distinctive bow to them such that, when they were stretched straight in front of her, the soles of her feet very nearly pressed together. Instead of walking, which her useless legs had never allowed her to do, she kept two little pieces of cardboard tied by a string to each of her knees. These acted as shoes for when she crawled around the dark room. She had gotten quite proficient at moving in that way. It's unbelievable how resourceful people can be.

As unshapely as her legs were, her mouth was even more so. Protruding from where her upper lip *should* have been was a thick tuft of flesh which jetted out like a rhino's horn so far from her face that it nearly touched her nose. On either side of that horn, perfectly symmetric from the corners of her mouth, were two gaps which left her rotting baby teeth exposed to the world.

Because of the way that she looked, this little girl was kept in the shed and very rarely seen at home. Most of her life was spent, day and night, with the goat, the two keeping each other company.



It probably wasn't much of a life. But there's nothing that we could have done about it.

I've never understood how people could be so cruel to others, just because of their appearance. Before the world ended, though, parents did exactly what Abdo and Amal did all the time. In fact, I once saw a documentary about people with disabilities and deformities and the injustices that they face throughout the world. According to that documentary, in many societies, people who have special needs are believed to be a curse from God. For these families, deformity was a shameful thing. The kids are abandoned at birth or kept hidden from the rest of the community in barns and sheds and small, dark rooms. They get beaten and abused and are not allowed to go to school. *Born Outcasts*. That's what the documentary called kids like that. Sometimes, before the world ended, when you saw stuff like that, there was nothing you could do but turn off the TV and sit in silence, marveling at how people could look away from the suffering that little children had to endure.

Without taking another step forward, Leonard paused to watch the seven-year-old at play. Playing, I'm told, is how kids learn. This girl had one game in particular which she absolutely *loved*. She would crawl on her hands and knees around the entire circumference of the dark room, collecting

scraps of brick, stone and concrete. She would place them in a heap on the floor and separate them by their kind, leaving her with separate piles: one of brick; one of stone; one of concrete. Then, when she was satisfied with their arrangement, she began the process of building towers out of them. The bigger bits of stone she would place on the bottom, the smallest crumbs of sun-hardened bricks she saved for the tower's very top. When the tower was very nearly completed, she would take her right hand and - with one terrific karate chop - scatter the pieces of brick, stone and concrete in a hundred directions all over the floor. This invariably made her squeal with delight, clap her hands together and repeat the process; crawling around the floor, avoiding the dung as best she could and gathering the materials all up together. She looked terribly human when she did that.

It's a shame she couldn't get her hands on any empty milk cartons; I bet she would have had a great time with those.

Leonard watched two rounds of that game before he took his first step toward her and the bench. It wasn't until then that the little girl noticed him for the first time. Angels can be very discreet when they want. Her eyes were enormous. Leonard squatted in front of her, lay his trumpet across his lap and gently began stroking her matted hair. In response, a handful of contentedly resting flies stirred suddenly and began buzzing angrily around

the room. Apart from her cleft-lip, Leonard noted that she really didn't look too terribly different than her sister Jamala had, lying beneath the heap of blankets on the bed inside. Both girls shared the same red-tinged hair; the same distended stomachs; the same fragile structure and toothpick arms.

"The name Jesus may not mean anything to you," he cooed in his most gentle voice, "but I've met him, and he says *you* are to die for."

The little girl looked up at Leonard, her eyebrows knit tightly together. Clearly, the name Jesus did not mean anything to her. Nor had she ever been told anything about herself that drove down the same highway as what Leonard had just said. She would have responded with any of a dozen questions, but her expressed vocabulary was limited to the handful of grunts and squeals that she had already displayed. Talking was a skill that most kids with cleft palates could never develop; it was hard to learn how when one's tongue wasn't capable of pivoting off of the roof of one's mouth. Like for the million other little girls in similar situations, it's just what she got for being born the way she was and growing up where she did. It *is* still a sad story, though, and my heart has always been too tender to take those for very long. I like happy endings, and would prefer we don't talk about her anymore.

Leonard rose reluctantly, grabbed the blue bucket from the bench, and stepped back into the light.

There was a very good reason for Dotty to smell like roses. She was a gardener and bought perfumes that matched her hobbies. When I discovered that idiosyncrasy of her personality, I was thankful she had no interest in diesel trucks.

Not long after I started work at Fuller's I decided to try my hand at gardening, too. Maybe working in fresh produce made a guy want to grow something himself. Maybe a guy just thought a shared hobby would cultivate some relational growth with Dotty Gunder. Either way, it seemed like a reasonable enough way to spend a weekend morning.

I bought a packet of seeds, a little book on the subject and a silver watering can. My hope was to grow red roses. Not so much because of the way that they looked - at that time, all flowers looked about the same to me - but because I always knew that nothing smelled quite as divine as a rose. No doubt Dotty Gunder, who perfumed herself in imitation extracts of the species, felt the same.

It wasn't many Saturdays later when, while watering, I saw the first signs of life poking shyly back up at me from the ground. From that moment on, there was no stopping them. I watered faithfully and watched with delight as the little shoots blossomed and grew, blossomed and grew all the

time. The package had said that they would be *red* roses, but they came up in every colour. I didn't mind that. Blue, white, orange; they were all beautiful little flowers in their own way. It made me proud to know that I had grown them.

I was so proud of them, in fact, that I didn't even care very much when I found out that what had been so eager to rise from the soil weren't actually roses at all, red or otherwise. It turns out they were poppies. Dotty herself told me that when I showed her a picture of my progress.

"Provocative little weeds, aren't they?" She said, giggling, and leaning against my desk. "They'll choke the life out of roses. You're gonna have to pull them all out and replant."

Personally, I wasn't sure pulling them up and replanting was worth the bother. Maybe the act of growing them myself had made me unreasonably sentimental about them. "I think weeds get a bad rap," I insisted. "Even if they don't *smell* like a rose, I think they can grow to be as pretty as any flower."

Dotty giggled again. I liked it when she did that. Then she looked over her shoulder and stopped abruptly. Standing in front of us was Mr. Fuller himself.

9.

Abdo's small, blunt fingers were working at the knot of the goat's leash when Leonard set the slaughtering bucket down beside him. In it was a pair of rusty shears, a whetstone and a knife, nearly as long as a man's forearm. Abdo thanked the angel for the delivery, and pivoted on the stump away from the goat. People of his religion had many rules for killing animals. One of these rules was that the animal wasn't supposed to see the blade before it was killed. They thought it was a cruel thing to let

the animal see the weapon that was going to be used against it. Abdo was always very careful to keep his knife hidden whenever he slaughtered one of his goats. There are things that a man knows to be right, even if a small act of compassion could never generate so much as a bleat of appreciation.

He took the knife in his right hand and began running the whetstone down the length of it. The sound of the blade sharpening against the stone was smooth and satisfying, something like the sound of a snake hissing out a warning. As if the sound reminded him to do so, he bit down on his jaw, and winced in response to the act.

Leonard took a backwards step away from Abdo. He lowered his voice discreetly. “Kenny,” he asked, “how long have you been doing this?”

“How long have I been doing what?”

“How long have you been recording?”

“Since the beginning, I’m one of the originals.”

“Is it always this bad?” As if waving a wand, Leonard indicated the charcoaled buildings; the starving, mangy goat; the soft sound bleeding through a nearby door of Amal weeping for her daughter and refusing to be comforted because she was no more.

“I thought the oppressed were going to be freed, that there would be justice for the poor, that the sick would be healed. But—” Leonard paused,

his voice lowered even farther, as if his vocal cords were playing the limbo. He drew up closely to the other angel and nearly whispered into his ear. “*I don’t think there’s any Kingdom of God in this place at all.*”

Kenny’s apology matched Leonard’s *sotto* voice. “I’m sorry,” he said, “God didn’t give angels like me knowledge of *good* and *evil* quite like you have. Our instructions are just to write it all down. I’m not qualified to comment on how *bad* things may or may not be.”

Leonard understood. “Are your assignments always around here?”

On the contrary, Kenny explained, whenever someone died, he took their records back upstairs where he would be placed in a queue. He would then be sent to the next conception without geographic distinction.

“Do you ever have Christians?”

“I have people who *say* they are Christians, certainly,” Kenny clarified. It was not his place to confirm who was or was not a genuine follower of the Christ.

For Leonard, it was nice to be reassured that there were still those who claimed the name.

“In time and place they go by different names,” Kenny explained. “They are Presbyterians, Catholics, Methodists, Evangelicals, Baptists, things like that.”

“What do those names mean?”



Kenny raised an explanatory finger near his face. It was precisely the *meaning* of those names which generated conversation amongst those who called themselves Christian. The documentation of the people who held them did not have substantial variance.

“Is it always like that?”

“No,” Kenny conceded with a wistfulness possible only to one who has known the presence of God. “There are times when I’ll record for a person who acts so much like Jesus in everything they do that you almost forget you’ve left heaven.”

Leonard shook his head. “If this is what the world is like *here*, I can’t imagine what it’s like where the Christians are.”

“Sometimes the assignments are very short,” Kenny agreed.

“And the people who say they are Christians make their children with broken faces live with the animals?”

Kenny nodded. In many places, yes.

“And they are all starving?”

Kenny paused. In many places, yes, but not all. “Actually, before Jamala, my last assignment was a man who died because he ate *too* much.”

“Really?”

“Yes, that was in a place that is very unlike this one. There, the children grow up to be very old;

they all learn how to read and write; they never go hungry.”

In a rare turn for the day, Leonard felt his mood elevate. He was glad to hear that there were places in the world that were unlike Yemen. “What was the Christian doing there?”

“He was living, until he died.” Kenny said. He may have kept precise records in anticipation of the Judgment, but the recorder's summation of the earthly experience was pithy.

“There are many, many who say they are Christians in those places.”

“But the Christians wouldn't *stay* in a place like that forever.”

“Would they not?” Anticipating what humans would and would not do was a speculation to which Kenny was not given.

“Not if they knew that others were suffering and that they had a way to make it better.”

I always thought that if God was a boss, he would be a boss a lot like Greg Fuller. He was tall and slender, and his thick, dark hair was always impeccably combed. At first, when he saw me and Dotty laughing and carrying on, I thought I might be in trouble. I had been with the company for a few months at that point, and was still uncertain how much fraternizing was permitted on the job. Mr. Fuller quickly put me at ease.

“You’ve done a really good job for us,” he said, calling me by name and ushering me into the conference room.

I thanked him with my fullest measure of humility and followed his wing-tipped steps to the now-familiar map dotted with coloured pins in the back of the room.

“I have a job I’d like you to do for us.”

Mr. Fuller always referred to the company that bore his name in the plural.

“Anything, sir,”

“I’d like you to head up a new location we’re looking to put in on the east side of the river.” Mr. Fuller tapped a long, olive toned finger near the lone red pin on the right side of the map.

I hesitated, unsure if Mr. Fuller was aware of how much I knew about the east side of town.

“I’ve run the numbers, sir, and I think our ticket might be to take over the old Penstralli place on West 3rd,” I countered.

Mr. Fuller raised his eyebrows almost imperceptibly. “Are you saying you don’t care to head up our new branch on the east side?”

That *was* what I was saying; staying in corporate was much more preferable than working on the east side of the river. “I can send you my data on the Penstralli place,” I offered.

Mr. Fuller took a deep breath. For a second, I was unsure if I had displeased him. Back before the world ended, a lot of bosses would pitch a

fit if an employee refused to do what they were told. I've heard that folks were fired for less. But not Mr. Fuller. Like I said before, he was a man of high character; a godly man and a good boss. He chewed on his lower lip thoughtfully and let go of the idea. "Okay, I wouldn't force you to do it. I'm sure someone else will be interested."

The truth was, of course, that no one had any more interest in going east of the river than I did. Mr. Fuller combed the whole office looking for a candidate with the same thoroughness with which he handled his own scalp in the morning, and couldn't get a single one of his candidates to bite. I imagine that would have frustrated a lot of bosses, but not Mr. Fuller. He hardly bat an eye. You know what he did instead? When we showed up to work the next day, right there, in the conference room, were two dozen bagels and a full tray of spreads. All that, just to show us he cared about us.

He really was the best boss ever.

Abdo tucked the sharpened blade into the long grey sleeve of his shirt before twisting his body back around to face the patient goat. He lay the goat down on its side expertly. Another of his religion's rules said that the animal's legs couldn't be tied down or bound while it was slaughtered. Offering assistance, Kenny stooped down awkwardly, pressing firmly into the goat's hind quarters. The animal was old, weak and not terribly resistant. The

body in place, Abdo rose behind it, grabbing it by the chin. He forced its head back at a severe angle, elongating its neck in a manner that, Leonard noted, was quite similar to how Abraham had seized his son. The knife still tucked into his shirt, Abdo used his free hand to begin feeling for the animal's pulsing jugular. The goat continued to wait patiently, helpless against the predicament in which it had found itself.

Satisfied that he had found the blood vessel of choice, Abdo withdrew the knife from its dark hiding place and held it firmly against the goat's neck. Another rule for killing animals allowed Abdo to only slice the goat's throat once. If his blade had to go back across the throat a second time, no one would be allowed to eat it. The goat would still be dead, of course, but its carcass would have to be abandoned in the wilderness of disuse.

Abdo offered a quick prayer and then pressed the blade deep into the goat's flesh. With one long, calculated sweep of his arm, he cut through the wind pipe, jugular and carotid artery. The goat, without so much as offering a single bleat in protest, began to bleed out.

Both Abdo and Kenny stood up and stepped away from the dying animal. Its legs flailed in all directions, starving neurons trying to make sense of what had happened, all the while hemorrhaging life from the single, expert incision in its neck. In a prolonged moment, the limbs subdued to sporadic

and involuntary twitches and then, finally, to a motionless silence.

An origin of a tear was forming in the corner of one of Leonard's angel eyes. Perhaps it was nothing more than the length of the day and the depth of the suffering that brought the words of the Brother Paul to his mind. He gripped the stem of his trumpet urgently, a slow, thoughtful smile spreading across his face. "It's just as he told the Romans."

Abdo looked from the goat to the angel as the latter explained his simplistic interpretation of a scripture which the former had never previously heard:

When the Brother Paul wrote to the Romans, he told them that they were to offer their bodies as living sacrifices, holy and pleasing to God. Christians didn't eat grass all day, seeking protection from the scorching heat beneath the shadow of a rusty trough, waiting to be milked. A Christian laid it all on the line; everything that it had as a member of the body of Christ. Every gift that the Christian had was to be offered. Not just the tenth portion of its money, time, or energy, but also its meat and skin and whatever else it could bring as a gift. A Christian, the Brother Paul said, hemorrhaged blood. *That* was a spiritual act of worship.

10.

“I do have one question,” Amal said when Leonard returned to the kitchen with a blue plastic bucket full of goat meat.

“Anything,” Leonard replied, a touch more tentatively than he intended as he placed the bucket on the old laminate counter.

The bucket had a decorative rosette pattern embossed along its outer walls. In some places, the rosette had been chipped away by falls from the counter. In others, stretches of the rosettes were

curled into charred black straws; evidence of having been left too close to an open fire. While the inside of the bucket had been washed with a proud and fastidious precision, the dust that had worked into the corners of the rosettes were impossible to entirely erase.

Amal lowered her eyes to avoid the angel's gaze. Her fingers began working anxiously at the uneven burned edges of the plastic bucket, tracing the rosette pattern and picking at the indefatigable dust. She chose her next words carefully.

"Abdo says that we have been following the wrong God this whole time. He was the only God that I ever knew. I don't know anything of this God that will be judging us tomorrow." The woman's hands, each still gripping fibrous cubes of meat, were trembling. Her voice was breaking up like cellphone reception in the Rocky Mountains. "Tell me," she begged, finally, "is he a loving God?"

Leonard leaned forward, his confidence surging. Questions about the Almighty ranked amongst his favorites. "*Love?* He is the *God* of love. You couldn't begin to *understand* the way that he loves." The angel's arms widened in the exaggerated manner of an over-exuberant hug or the imitation of a crucifixion.

Beginning with the goodness of creation, the mercy that God showed to his children throughout the ages and culminating with the life of Christ, Leonard pointed out time after time the



lovingness that God had shown the world. In fact, were you to believe the rendition of the life of Christ as told by Leonard, you might come away with the impression of Jesus as some sort of Jewish Mother Teresa, walking the paths of Palestine, trying to make people's lives more bearable.

"Jesus healed the sick and fed the hungry. Do you think he did that so that people would feel compelled to follow him?" Leonard's voice rose in offense at his own question. "Of course not! Jesus didn't use his power to manipulate feelings or obligate people to him. He did it because he *loved*, and when you love someone, you want to spare them from suffering."

Amal's eyebrows wrinkled thoughtfully, and when they did, a bead of sweat ran down the length of her nose. She wiped it with the back of her hand. "But if he is so loving, why didn't he care that my daughter was sick?" Her red eyes became glassy with moisture again and she proceeded to call each one of her dead children by name.

Looking into those eyes, Leonard noticed that, in a different life, she might have been a rather pleasant woman. It is terribly difficult to be pleasant with an empty stomach and a broken heart.

"He *did* care," Leonard insisted, "he cared very much. That's what the Christians proved. You see, the way God set it up, the Christians were transformed by his love. It radiates out of them like the sunrise through your window. You are supposed

to know that God loves you by the way the Christians love you. And let me tell you this: the Christians love you *very* much.”

Amal cupped her face in her open, sticky hands and began sobbing again. She took a staggering half step backwards, her shoulder blades hitting the dull-painted wall behind her. Slowly, forced by the weight of gravity and sorrow, she slumped to the floor, gasping for one final question to be answered. “If they all loved me so much, why didn’t any of them *do* anything?”

“Would *you* have taken that job on the east side of the river?”

It was the end of the work week and Dotty was climbing into the passenger seat of my car. Driving her home had become a part of my daily commute.

“What makes you think that he didn’t offer it to me first?” Dotty said with a smile. There was always laughter in her voice.

When I started the car’s engine, the radio came on with it. I reached out to turn down the volume, in much the same way that Mr. Fuller offering Dotty the job first tempered my own feeling of self-importance.

“And you didn’t want it?”

Dotty shook her head, her earrings jangling in the afternoon light. “It’s not even the *job* that I don’t want so much,” she said, “it’s what taking the job might *imply*.”

“How do you mean?”

“I wouldn’t want Fuller to think I was doing it for the wrong reasons.”

Dotty understood that there were all sorts of motivations for doing a job, and not all of them were very good.

I agreed with her on that. “You wouldn’t want to take the job just to impress him with what a good employee you are.”

“Exactly, there needs to be more authenticity than that.”

Authenticity. I liked the way she spoke the word.

“Maybe,” I offered, gently pressing my foot to the gas as we left the parking lot, “you could tell me more about how you feel over dinner this weekend.”

In the history of our acquaintanceship, it was a suggestion of unprecedented directness. Sure, we had done a fair amount of flirting the past few months, but neither of us had made any overtly romantic invitations to the other. As we drove down LaGrange in the silence that followed, I stole a glance to my right to see how the suggestion had taken.

Dotty was looking back at me with full, unblinking eyes, her back pressed into the corner where the passenger seat met the car door. It was not a promising posture.

With Amal's last sob, Leonard joined her on the floor. For a long moment, the angel searched for the right words. He didn't find them, of course. He was only a newcomer to planet earth and had limited theological training.

"I've thought about that a lot today," he began slowly, "and I think that where the Christians are must be so much worse than this that they couldn't offer any help."

When Amal closed her eyes, she could still see the way the stones of the now crumpled buildings had sprung into the air like a jack-in-the-box when the bombs had fallen; she could still hear her son whooping in fear as the walls of their house came down like a Jericho nightmare; she could feel, once more, her own helpless desperation as she and Abdo dug through the rubble afterward, their ears tuned in vain for the sound of that whoop. It had been a long time since their TV had beamed them images from other parts of the world, but it was difficult to convince her that their's was an enviable situation.

Leonard was adamant. "I know it may be hard for you to believe that there are places in the world worse than this, but I know what the followers of Jesus are like, and they wouldn't have let these things happen to you here if there was any way they could have stopped them. Christians *have* to do just like Jesus did, and Jesus wouldn't have let your children starve if he had bread to feed them. He

wouldn't let your children die if he could heal them. The only *possible* solution is that where the Christians are, people are suffering more."

Amal was unconvinced. Neither she nor Leonard understood how spiritual suffering is of such greater significance than physical suffering that it renders the latter essentially irrelevant. All she knew was what it meant to be hungry and the lengths that a mother would go to shield her children from that hopeless gnawing sensation.

"Maybe the Son of God would give bread to a stranger, but that's because he doesn't *need* bread like the rest of us do. Here, a person has to take care of their own. If *I* had a loaf of bread, I wouldn't offer it to a stranger. I would give my daughter as much as she wants now and save the rest for the next time she hungered."

"That's because you don't have the relationship with God that the Christians do," Leonard responded patiently. "Christians give and give, even when it hurts; the same way Jesus did."

"Maybe *some* do, but I bet there are a lot of Christians who don't."

Leonard shook his head. There were no Christians like that, he said. "A person can't just *say* they're a follower of Jesus. His followers have to keep his commandments. That's why not everyone who believes that Jesus is the messiah becomes a Christian."

At this point, Leonard indicated the stones that had buried her son. “Imagine being told you had to carry those stones around with you wherever you went. That’s kind of like what Jesus told his disciples they would have to do if they wanted to follow him. He said that they would have to carry with them the very thing that was going to kill them. The cost of being a disciple of Jesus was very high. He said that those who wanted to be his disciples would have to weigh that cost. If they decided that cost was too great, they would have to go and follow someone else.”

All angels have great Bible knowledge, even if many of them - like Leonard - don’t know the first principle of exegesis. You shouldn’t believe *everything* you read, you know.

Back before the world ended, there were few insults that could knock the wind out of you like having a potential romantic partner tell you that you were liked as a friend and nothing more. Romance had a kick like a mule. It was a perplexing wound and one that I began nursing as soon as Dotty told me the ugly truth.

We were parked in front of her house and her hand was on the car door. “I’m sorry if I led you on,” she apologized.

“Not at all,” I lied, raising my lower lip defiantly. Something was stinging in my eyes and I could feel myself on the edge of embarrassment.

“I’d like it if we could still be friends,” she offered.

Once, when I was first learning how to drive, I ran over a cat. Not the whole cat, just the part of it that was unfortunate enough to be napping underneath my rear tire. The screeching sound the poor thing made was something dreadful. Realizing my mistake, I jumped out of the car and found the wounded animal, terribly confused and arching its back. Its tail was limp and fractured. I tried to gather it into my arms, but it just hissed and struck at me with its clawed fist.

I am not proud to say it, but at that moment, Dotty was my Buick Lacrosse and I was the cat.

“You mean, you want to keep *using* me for free rides home, is that it?”

“I haven’t been *using* you,” Dotty said defensively. “I *thought* we were friends.” The music I once heard in her voice was hitting me a bit differently now.

I weighed her words and her offer of continued shared commutes. Helping out a romantic interest was a lot like anything else in the world. Its value was greatly diminished without a potential payout at the end.

Dotty smiled in her way at me again. It was a knowing, confessional smile and, for a second, she was that same ten year old girl with the sharp elbows standing next to me in the cafeteria line. Neither one of us could blame the other for the

maintenance of an economic perspective. She and I lived in very much the same world. We had for a long time, and would continue to do so until the wee hours of that Tuesday morning when it all ended.

The somber silence that followed Amal's sobbing was occasionally punctuated by a growing buzz of preparation for the funeral. She and Leonard were no longer alone in the kitchen. A dull knife was thudding against the counter-top; instructions to fetch this or that were being whispered to a neighbor child. By this time, everyone in town had heard both that the world was ended and that Jamala was going to have a proper funeral. News always traveled fast in a small town.

With this news came an outpouring of support for Jamala's funeral that gave the funeral preparations a sense of festivity unique in the experience of the town's women. Every starving mother in the village began contributing the little things she had stowed away to help with Jamala's funeral preparations. They went to their pantries and emptied their last meagre rations. They distributed their rice and sorghum in plastic buckets so that they could be cooked over every open fire. As it turns out, an unexpected joy of preparing the Last Supper is knowing that no one is going to get stuck having to do the dishes.

Leonard remained present for the preparation of the meal, although he didn't know the



first thing about cooking food. Angels don't need sustenance the way humans do. You see, although God gave them the ability to consume food when they take on flesh, the satisfaction that they gain from breaking bread doesn't come from satiating an appetite. Their satisfaction is drawn from the sharing of a meal with another.

He kept sentry over a pot of cooking rice in the kitchen and watched as the bedroom door opened and closed as the women came in and out. According to the place's traditions, only women were allowed to prepare the child's body for burial. Then they would hand it over to the men, who would lay the corpse in the ground and cover it with earth. With rare exception, not even the mother would attend the funeral itself.

Amal's mother came in first asking if there was any of the pretty smelling soap that they could use for washing the girl's body. Another of the women, who had sat beside Amal as the girl died, asked if Amal wanted shoes for the little girl's feet. There was an old pair somewhere nearby that her son could fetch if needed. Knowledge that the world has ended could bring out the generosity in anybody.

The woman in the yellow headscarf came in last, asking where she might find a clean, white sheet in which to wrap the girl's body. All people of the village, regardless of rank, were buried uniformly in a clean, white sheet.

“Kind of like this one,” the yellow head-scarfed woman explained to Leonard, lightly tugging at the loose sleeve of his dirty robe. “Only cleaner.”

“It was clean when I got here,” Leonard apologized.

“I’m sure it was,” the yellow head-scarfed woman answered thoughtfully. “Nothing ever seemed to be able to stay clean around here for very long.”

11.

In the last scene of the Gospel of St. John, Jesus shows up at the sea where Peter and his buddies are fishing in a boat. When Peter sees Jesus on the shore, he takes off his clothes, jumps off the boat and swims back to shore to be with him. Peter is desperate for Jesus, and maybe he still feels guilty for having denied him three times in Jerusalem before the rooster crowed. Maybe it's his guilt that makes him especially desperate for the Lord. Anyways, I may not be getting this exactly right, so

you can verify it in your own Bible if you'd like, but they have this touching moment on the shores of Galilee. They get a little privacy - just themselves away from the other disciples - and Jesus asks Peter if he loves him. Peter says to Jesus, "Lord, you know I love you."

It's true, Peter loves Jesus more than anything. More, even, than life itself. And you know what Jesus says? He says just about the most beautiful words in the whole New Testament. I guess that shouldn't be surprising. He is the Lord, after all. He looks back at Peter, this guy who has followed him for three years, who has shown both flashes of brilliant faith and the same sorts of fallen errors that any of the rest of us might make. Jesus puts his hand on that guy's shoulder, gives it a tight, reassuring squeeze and says, "I know you love me, Peter, and I love you, too."

To get Jamala to the grave that her father had dug that morning, the men of the village had taken her body, wrapped in its white sheet, and laid her carefully on a donkey cart. Since there wasn't a donkey left in the village to attach to the cart, two of the town's younger men were used as substitutes. When they got tired, they were replaced by two others, and so on. In that manner they proceeded out of the village, navigating the upturned streets and dilapidated buildings to the graveyard. They walked slowly, deliberately; tired steps on calloused feet. The donkey cart, which had been pieced back

together from the remains of even older carts, groaned in protest from its hidden axle; its wheels crunched with determined force over mounds of cinderblock.

In the back of the procession, maintaining a respectable distance, were two angelic beings, holding their respective instruments. The angel on the right, still shuffling with uncertain self-consciousness at his newfound visibility, held his quill and an empty scroll. On the left, the other angel, his eyes narrowed and his brow furrowed in sad contemplation, held his trumpet in front of him with both hands. As they passed through the narrow streets, the angel on the right glimpsed a third angel, a constant and terrifying presence on planet earth. He was the angel who would visit all mankind. Sometimes you could feel his presence descend upon a room; other times he would touch a person in a fleeting and unexpected instant, leaving before a word could be spoken in protest. For millennia, he had roamed the earth with a drawn sword in his right hand. He was a quiet and obedient angel.

Leonard only saw him for a moment as they passed. He was sitting on a rock above the procession, watching the girl Jamala's body as it passed. His angel eyes were tired and his sword - for the first time since the garden - was retired to its sheath.

Leonard's voice was scarcely more than a whisper as they left the village. "Kenny," he said, eyeing the plodding steps of the men ahead of them, "something you told me earlier still doesn't make sense to me."

Kenny addressed the other angel with concern. Precision was of paramount importance. Redaction, of course, would be impossible, but he assured Leonard that he would be more than happy to clarify any points of ambiguity.

Leonard indicated his appreciation. "You say there are places on earth where the children do not hunger; where the people learn to read and write and live to an old age. And that many of these people call themselves Christians."

"That's true," the recorder said with a nod of affirmation.

Leonard shook his head in confusion. He was the sort of being that took the teachings of Jesus at face value and assumed that all of Christ's followers were compelled to imitate the Lord's model as closely as they could. Only a visitor to planet earth, he could not fathom the complexities of culture, family and circumstance. He did not know what it would take to disregard all of these things, and even human nature itself, in order to live a life that would make any non-believing observer sure that a person had lost their mind. Following Jesus was never as simple as Leonard imagined.

"It was difficult to explain to Amal why a Christian would be in a place like that and not here."

Kenny's face brightened with joy at the unanticipated prospect of his own potential helpfulness. "I may be able to help explain that." He beamed a smile at Leonard. "God told them."

"How's that?"

"I've written this one down on a dozen scrolls," Kenny tapped emphatically on the blank roll of parchment in his hand. "God called those Christians to stay right where they were."

"He did?"

Leonard began to sputter. "Jesus called his disciples to go out and *die*."

"That's what Jesus *said* in the gospels," Kenny agreed, returning the blank scroll into a secret fold of his sleeve, "but I have recorded - many times - that God has called them to glorify him with their lives where they are."

"What does that mean?"

Kenny shrugged. "I only write these things," he reminded his angel friend, "I don't have to understand them."

"Do you ever *hear* it when God calls them?"

Kenny stopped now, allowing the distance to grow between the angels and the men heading for the graveyard. Sometimes, the procession's slow, deliberate steps obscured the donkey cart. Other times, the angels could see through them to the body of the girl in white, whose life the recorder had spent the last twelve years documenting.

As the distance between the angels and the men grew, Kenny let out a long and pleasant sigh. “Twice I have,” he said, finally. “It’s a beautiful thing to hear God’s voice. Usually, though, a person will say that they have had a feeling.”

Leonard squinted hard against the warm evening light. Recorders like Kenny, of course, couldn’t discern anything about a person’s feelings. If a guy got whacked in the head with a two-by-four and said he was seeing stars, Kenny would just as soon call him an astronomer as an ambulance.

“They’re called by a feeling?” He scanned his angel mind with its encyclopedic knowledge of the Scriptures for instances of such things. He licked his dry angel lips. “Kenny, did you ever wonder if maybe sometimes it wasn’t *truly* God who called them and told them what to do with their lives?”

“No,” Kenny shook his head, “I *don’t* think things like that. I just write what I see and hear. I am not a fact checker.”

“But there *will* be a fact checking.”

“Of course there will be. Tomorrow at the Judgment, God is going to double check everything that he told people versus what they *said* he told them. That’s a part of what the records are for,” Kenny tapped again at one of his scrolls.”

“I’ll have to make sure I’m there for that.”



12.

Of all places, I once saw my old fourth grade teacher Mrs. Terfel at a deli in Paris, Texas. After Fuller Food went bankrupt, I went to visit my uncle. Even hundreds of miles from our old elementary school, and with her hair having turned a fine grey colour, I recognized her immediately. It's funny how there are some faces that you'll never forget.

She was waiting patiently at a small corner table. On the wall above her was a framed article

from the weekend edition of the local paper, celebrating the diner's longevity. In her hand, the wrinkles carefully smoothed away, was a little white ticket for a half-pound of honey glazed ham. I had come for the gouda cheese.

We exchanged pleasantries and commented on the improbability of our small-town encounter. I told her about the company closure, the visit to my uncle and my prospects for the future. She told me about the town's reasonable cost of living and the unmatched rhythm of life in Paris. It was a wonderful place, I agreed, to settle down in retirement. I was glad to see her, and I could tell she felt the same.

"You know, Mrs. Terfel, I still think a lot about Hurricane Katrina because of you."

Hurricane Katrina, Mrs. Terfel told me, ended up getting married to Harvey Wittenberger. *Hurricane Katrina Wittenberger*. That's what she was called now. Small world.

"The *other* Hurricane Katrina," I reminded her. "Remember, the jar with all of our lunch money."

Mrs. Terfel clapped her hands in remembrance. "Ah, yes, I'd forgotten all about that." Her head went back and she laughed gently to herself. "You know," she said, calling me by name, "I never did understand why you signed that sheet of mine and then went ahead eating the cafeteria food."

She had never let on that she knew about that.

“You didn’t *have* to sign up in the first place, you know.”

“Of course I didn’t, but it seemed like a very nice thing to be a part of.”

“All the same,” Mrs. Terfel said, “you didn’t *have* to.” She lowered her voice in appropriate severity, “to be perfectly honest, if I’d known you were going to go ahead spending money to eat the cafeteria food, I would have rathered you didn’t sign my sheet at all.”

As a teacher, Mrs. Terfel was always such a nice woman; one of my favorites. Old age and retirement seemed to have soured her.

The angels were now leaning up against the donkey cart, looking out from the very same hill upon which Leonard’s cloud had parked that morning. The sun was hanging lower in the sky and threatening to touch the horizon like a sticky fingered kid reaching out for affection. It threw long shadows across the makeshift graveyard. With careful precision, Abdo and his neighbours eased the little girl Jamala’s fragile body into the ground. The lightness of her frame was offset by the weakness of their arms. Once lowered, they straightened out her limp form into a more dignified position and looked back up the hill.

Abdo was the first to step toward the angels, an obvious delegate for his friends. “There are prayers that we normally say when we bury our

children,” he began, his voice dry and hoarse from the day’s labour, “but it makes no sense to say them now; they’re all addressed to the wrong God.”

All eyes were fixed now, pleadingly, on the angels. “We were hoping,” Abdo continued, “that you might have something that you could share with us instead.”

Leonard’s grip tightened instinctively around his trumpet. Surprisingly, of the thousands of songs in his repertoire, he didn’t have a single one somber enough to be appropriate for a funeral. It would seem they have no need for funeral dirges in heaven. “I would have to improvise something,” he said, raising the trumpet to his lips.

Abdo was embarrassed. “No, no,” he said, “I mean, tell us what will happen next.”

Leonard’s trumpet lowered immediately in an equal measure of embarrassment. “Of course.”

“Everything will be set up tomorrow for the Judgment. When you wake up, you will all find that you have been transported to Jerusalem, the city of the Great King. Now, there are records on file of everything that each one of you has ever said and done. *Everything*, both good and evil.” He extended his arm toward Kenny, indicating the important role that angels like him would play in determining their fates.

He sensed the crowd’s growing tension. I would doubt if, in the history of the world, there were a man naturally born of woman for whom the

idea of his every act being documented for prosperity wasn't a frightening prospect. Leonard quickly noted their uneasiness and tried to ease their fears. "Not *everybody's* evil deeds are going to be revealed," he assured them.

An audible sigh of relief rippled through the Yemeni crowd like a soft wave rolling up on white sand.

"There has been a great redaction. God has taken each sin and transgression out of the Christians' files. He doesn't remember a single one. Not a single one of them will be brought against them in the Judgment."

The crowd emitted another sigh. Its sound was no longer that of a wave being gently absorbed by soft sand, but now it was that of one breaking against a harsh rock of disappointment. A squawk of anxious murmurs followed.

"Excuse me, sir," an anonymous voice called from the crowd, "what about *our* transgressions? What will happen to us in the Judgment?"

I cannot say for certain, but I imagine Leonard must not have had the heart to tell them they were all going straight to hell. You can't blame him for that; only a fool doesn't play to their audience. It was much easier to explain it in the words of Jesus from the gospel of St. Matthew.

“Listen,” the angel said, raising both hands above his head, “I don’t know *exactly* what is going to happen to all of you tomorrow, but I know that there will be two lines. One of the lines will be for the sheep and the other line will be for the goats.”

“Sheep and goats?”

“Yes. The sheep are the ones who fed the hungry, gave drink to the thirsty, welcomed the stranger, clothed the naked, visited the sick and came to those in prison. Even though they didn’t realize it at the time, they had done these things to Jesus. They are going to be welcomed to inherit the kingdom.”

The anonymous voice was hopeful. “That sounds like a good thing. What about the goats? What did *they* do to Jesus?”

“The goats didn’t do *anything* to Jesus,” Leonard said. “That’s the point. They are going to *tell* Jesus everything that they would have done had they known it was him who was hungry, thirsty, naked, estranged, sick and in prison. But Jesus isn’t going to give them any credit for that.”

“What will happen to them?”

“They are going to be sent to eternal punishment.”

“And it will all be determined by how they treated Jesus?”

“That’s what Jesus said.”

Leonard, like all of us, should have been more careful when he let Jesus speak for himself.

Doing so can give you a theology that comes out sounding borderline heretical.

“But there’s also our sins,” another anonymous voice called out, “our files were never redacted.”

“Yes,” Leonard conceded thoughtfully, “that could very well be a problem for you.”

“But we didn’t even *know* what the teachings of Jesus were,” the man protested.

Leonard deflected any further discussion regarding the Yemeni crowd’s predicament. “You’ll have to wait and find out tomorrow. I just play the trumpet.”

The last Tuesday in the history of the world was coming to an end with the tossing of dirt into the grave of a little girl named Jamala. Even now, in the blue light of evening, when the last rays of sun struck the white burial sheet just right, the whole thing shone like flashes of lightning. Such is the quality of heavenly tailors and thread. The warm air held a light breeze and Leonard and Kenny could both feel the foreign sensation of it whispering against their round angel kneecaps. While they stood there, each man took his turn throwing dirt onto her body, just like they had done for hundreds of years. It was an ancient tradition. Handful by handful, her little body was covered in the earth from whence she came.

Before they turned back to the smashed milk carton town to join their wives for the last supper, Abdo asked if, after all, Leonard wouldn't mind playing a small tune; just a short song as the sun disappeared. The night was starless and silent, just like Burt had always said it was when the angels had played for Bethlehem's shepherds. In hindsight, there were many ways in which that earlier night resembled this one.

Although Leonard was not given to improvisation, he raised his trumpet and felt the presence of humanity surrounding him. He parted his angel lips and let a slow note leak out, then two, then three. It's a shame that Kenny had no ear for music and couldn't transcribe the melody for you. I wish you could have heard it. It's the sort of thing you would have never guessed, but, as it turns out, angels can write one heckuva funeral dirge.



### **Our World Today:**

- In Niger, 14% of deaths are attributed to unsafe water.<sup>1</sup> Around the world this year, a child will die from a water-borne illness every thirty-seven seconds.<sup>2</sup>
- Including 57% of Somalians, nearly 9% of all people in the world are undernourished.<sup>3</sup>
- Only 7% of children in Mali will leave primary school with basic educational proficiency.<sup>4</sup>
- 55% of women in Bangladesh are illiterate<sup>5</sup>
- A child whose mother can read has a 50% greater chance of living past age 5.<sup>6</sup>
- Globally, if all adults could receive just two more years of schooling, 60 million people could escape poverty. If all adults completed secondary education, the total number of poor people in the world would be cut in half.<sup>7</sup>
- By some estimates, the 103 billion dollars tithed to churches every year could eliminate the most extreme poverty in the world; however, only 2% of church funds raised are spent on international work.<sup>8</sup>
- This year, Christians will spend more money on auditing their churches than they will on all their workers in the non-Christian world combined.<sup>9</sup>
- Human trafficking in Thailand is a \$12 billion dollar industry;<sup>10</sup> one in every 113 people living there is a slave.<sup>11</sup>
- There are as many as 300,000 human trafficking victims in Eastern Europe today. The average life-

span of a child caught in human trafficking in Eastern Europe is two years.<sup>12</sup>

- Worldwide, 6.2 million children are trafficked every year.<sup>13</sup>
- Christians are more likely to be killed in a plane crash than to be among the .0005% of believers who live and work in a location where the Christ is not otherwise known.<sup>14</sup>
- In Chad, 1 in every 15 women will die due to complications of childbirth.<sup>15</sup>
- In many countries, children with cleft-lips are not allowed to go to school; in rural Ethiopia, children whose clefts have been repaired have their chance of attending school nearly doubled.<sup>16</sup>
- 4.8 billion people, including 95% of those living in South Asia and the majority of sub-Saharan Africa, do not have access to surgical care.<sup>17</sup>
- Measles kills 140,000 children under the age of five every year. In Papua New Guinea, only 37% of children have been immunized.<sup>18</sup>
- It is estimated that if global vaccination coverage were improved, the deaths of 1.5 million children would be prevented annually.<sup>19</sup>
- In the Nuba Mountains, a non-believing chief, who sees the work of a lone Christian physician at the region's only hospital, says that Jesus Christ lives in his village.<sup>20</sup>

...

*Religion that God our Father accepts as pure and faultless is this:  
to look after orphans and widows in their distress and to keep  
oneself from being polluted by the world.*

*The Epistle of St. James, 1:27*

- <sup>1</sup> <http://wawash.fiu.edu/drupal-cms/blog/2013/11/13/aquatabs-low-cost-solution-safe-drinking-water-niger>
- <sup>2</sup> <https://watermission.org/global-water-crisis/>
- <sup>3</sup> [data.worldbank.org](http://data.worldbank.org)
- <sup>4</sup> <https://palnetwork.org/in-school-but-learning-nothing/>
- <sup>5</sup> <https://knoema.com/atlas/Bangladesh/topics/Education/Literacy/Adult-female-illiteracy#:~:text=Bangladesh%20%2D%20Adult%20female%20illiterate%20population&text=In%202016%2C%20adult%20female%20illiteracy,ending%20at%2055%20%25%20in%202016.>
- <sup>6</sup> <https://www.globalpartnership.org/benefits-of-education>
- <sup>7</sup> <https://sdg.iisd.org/news/unesco-publications-assess-links-between-education-poverty-and-health/>
- <sup>8</sup> <https://davidjoannes.com/shocking-stats-on-missions-giving/>
- <sup>9</sup> <https://davidjoannes.com/shocking-stats-on-missions-giving/>
- <sup>10</sup> <https://borgenproject.org/10-facts-about-human-trafficking-in-thailand/>
- <sup>11</sup> <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-thailand-trafficking-victims-trfn/record-number-of-trafficking-victims-in-thailand-raises-concerns-over-care-idUSKBN1Z51N3>
- <sup>12</sup> <https://www.mission823.com/human-trafficking-eastern-europe/>
- <sup>13</sup> <https://www.mission823.com/human-trafficking-eastern-europe/>
- <sup>14</sup> <http://www.thetravelingteam.org/stats>
- <sup>15</sup> <https://borgenproject.org/maternal-mortality-in-chad/>
- <sup>16</sup> <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC6846294/#R5>
- <sup>17</sup> [https://www.thelancet.com/journals/langlo/article/PIIS2214-109X\(15\)70115-4/fulltext](https://www.thelancet.com/journals/langlo/article/PIIS2214-109X(15)70115-4/fulltext)
- <sup>18</sup> <https://www.who.int/news-room/fact-sheets/detail/measles>
- <sup>19</sup> <https://www.chop.edu/centers-programs/vaccine-education-center/global-immunization/diseases-and-vaccines-world-view>
- <sup>20</sup> <https://www.nytimes.com/2015/06/28/opinion/sunday/nicholas-kristof-hes-jesus-christ.html>